

Thomas Sankara: Internal Contradictions, External Conspiracies and the Search for an African Leader

Henry B. Ogunjewe PhD

Department of History & Strategic Studies, University of Lagos, Nigeria

Email; hogunjewo@unilag.edu.ng, drogunjewohenry@gmail.com

Tel: 0802 331 2247, 0907 8485658

Abstract

Despite the struggles of the African states to entrench democracy, evolve out of the devastating woods of colonial adventure and embark on lasting nation building programmes, projects and policies, there are remarkable constraints and hurdles bothering on their ability to upstage leaders with vision, character, capacity, capability and courage who see the myriad of possibilities and opportunities in the constituent states. The continent, though bedevilled with visionary leadership vacuum, may also need to move beyond the 'leadership' explanation and find more plausible reasons why African leaders often seem unwilling or unable to ensure stronger policies and deeper democracies. There are inherent internal contradictions, structural defects, social dislocations and external conspiracies as epitomised by the truncated leadership revolution brought on stage by Thomas Sankara, former President of Burkina Faso. This paper examines such issues with a view to analysing the internal contradictions and external conspiracies which deviate from the arguments of western scholars that African culture rejects the values which underpin democracy. But in some cases, even their own evidence points in the opposite direction, showing that their African respondents' value accountable government, free speech and the right to a say in decisions as well as participation in policy making process of the component states, all of which are core democratic values. Indeed, the leadership question in Africa is complex characterized by external and internal contradictions which need to be resolved if the continent is to be reckoned with in the comity of nations. This paper is a field research with reliance on secondary sources of data in published outlets, newspaper interviews, and books. The objective of the paper is to critically evaluate the theoretical basis of good governance as related to liberalization, democracy and decentralization, using Afrocentricity and Africana critical theory. The paper recommends deliberate strategic plans, programmes and policies that will enhance the upstaging of visionary, capacious, courageous leaders across Africa.

Keywords: Thomas Sankara, colonial adventure, nation building, visionary leadership, external conspiracies and internal contradictions

Introduction

“While revolutionaries as individuals can be murdered, you cannot kill ideas “
(Thomas Sankara)

Thomas Sankara was born with the original name Thomas Isidore Noël Sankara on December 21, 1949 in Yako, French Upper Volta as the third of ten children to Joseph and Marguerite Sankara. His father, Joseph Sankara, a gendarme of mixed Mossi-Fulani heritage while his mother, Marguerite Kinda, was of direct Mossi descent (Harsch, 2014). He spent his early years in Gaona, a town in the humid southwest to which his father was transferred as an auxiliary gendarme. As the son of one of the few African functionaries then, employed by the colonial state, he enjoyed a relatively privileged position. The family lived in a brick house with the families of other gendarmes at the top of a hill overlooking the rest of Gaoua (Harsch, 2014).

Thomas Sankara attended primary school at Bobo-Dioulasso. He applied himself seriously to his schoolwork and excelled in both (Science) Mathematics and (Arts) French. This intelligence and seriousness with his academic work endeared him to many of his teachers. He was very frequent in the Church services, taking on some assignments which impressed the clergy as he deploys his energy and eagerness to learn, some of the priests indeed encouraged Thomas to go on to seminary to study, get trained to become a Priest immediately after his primary school education noting his passionate desire for the Christian life and kingdom service. Despite initially agreeing to pursue the theological training, he took the examination required for entry to the sixth grade in the secular educational system and passed. Thomas's decision to continue his education at the nearest lycee Ouezzin Coulibaly (named after a pre-independence nationalist) proved to be a turning point in the life of the young man. This step got him out of his father's household since the lycée was in Bobo-Dioulasso, the country's commercial centre. There, he made close friends, including Fidèle Too, who he later appointed a minister in his cabinet in the future.

Soumane Touré, was another very close friend of Thomas Sankara, even though he was in a more advanced class. Touré must have fired his interest in reading and in-depth study. A respondent in the course of this research who prefers anonymity submits that Touré, was quite a force in his early academic pursuits and Catholic doctrines. Aside from the Priests who were fascinated about Thomas' passion for the Church and Catholic doctrines, his Roman Catholic parents also initially wanted him to become a priest.

However, as fate would have it, he chose a career in the Military. The Military was relatively popular at the time, having just ousted a despised, unpopular President. It was also seen by young intellectuals as a national institution that might potentially help to discipline the inefficient and corrupt bureaucracy, counterbalance the inordinate influence of traditional chiefs and generally help modernize the country, which was considered lagging behind in terms of growth and development from all indices.

Moreover, acceptance into the military academy would come with a scholarship; Sankara could not easily afford the costs of further education otherwise. He took the entrance exam and passed.

(Harsch, 2014). An anonymous source also submitted that his consideration for his parents' financial state may have informed his decision to join the military since there were not going to be school fees or charges that would have been burdensome on his parents. (Anonymous Respondent)

Thomas Sankara entered the military academy of Kadiogo in Ouagadougou with the Academy's pioneering set of 1966 at the age of 17 (Harsch, 2014). At the Academy, the young boy witnessed the first military coup d'état in Upper Volta led by Lieutenant-Colonel Sangoule Lamizana on January 3, 1966. The trainee officers were taught and instructed by civilian professors in the social sciences. Prof. Adama Touré, who taught history and geography, and was renowned for his progressive ideas, (even though he did not publicly share them) was the academic director at the time. He invited a few of his brightest and more politically inclined students, among them Thomas Sankara, to join informal discussions about imperialism, neo-colonialism, socialism and communism, the Soviet and Chinese revolutions, the liberation movements in Africa and similar topics outside of the classroom. This marked the beginning of Thomas Sankara's systematically exposure to a revolutionary perspective on Upper Volta, Africa and the world. Aside from his academic and extracurricular political activities, Sankara also pursued his passion for music and played the guitar (Harsch, 2014).

In 1970, the 20 years old Thomas Sankara went on for further military studies at the Military Academy of Antsirabe (Madagascar), from where he graduated as a junior officer in 1973. At the Antsirabe academy, the range of instruction went beyond standard military subjects, which allowed Sankara to study Agriculture, including how to raise crop yields and better the lives of farmers. The themes Thomas later took up in his own administration and country (Harsch, 2014). During that period, he read profusely on history and military strategy, thus acquiring the concepts and analytical tools that he would later use in his reinterpretation of Burkinabe political history (Martin, 1987) The life of the future leader is being shaped in diverse ways.

Thomas Sankara's Structural Preparation for Power

As soon as Thomas Sankara returned to Upper Volta in 1972, he fought with the Army in the border war between Upper Volta and Mali in 1974. He earned fame for his noticeably heroic performance in the border war with Mali, but years later he would publicly renounce the war as "useless and unjust", a clear indication and reflection of his rising and growing political consciousness and revolutionary tendencies (Thomas Sankara Speaks, 2007). He also became a popular figure in the capital city of Ouagadougou. Thomas Sankara was a decent, versatile, guitarist who played professionally in a band named "Tout-a-Coup Jazz" Band during which he was also known with his bicycle (*BBC News. 30 April 2014*). His style of living was beginning to reveal his ideology. His exposure to the people, the country and the suffering of the communities he went on his music tours set an incurable anger for a desperate change which he was prepared to champion and for which he eventually laid his life.

In 1976, he became commander of the Commando Training Centre in Po. It was in the same year he met Blaise Compaore in Morocco. This meeting is indeed phenomenal as will be seen on his rise to power and eventual loss after landmark 1531 days. During the presidency of Colonel Saye

Zerbo a group of young officers propelled by similar ideology formed a secret organisation called the "Communist Officers' Group" (*Regroupement des officiers communistes*, or ROC), the best-known members being Henri Zongo, Jean-Baptiste Boukary Lingani, Blaise Compaore and Thomas Sankara. (Kasuka, 2012). This was a platform to discuss the dearth of leadership in Africa in general and Upper Volta in particular.

Sankara was appointed Minister of Information in Saye Zerbo's military government in September 1981. Sankara differentiated himself from other government officials in many ways such as biking to work every day, instead of driving in a car. While his predecessors would censor journalists and newspapers, Sankara encouraged investigative journalism and allowed the media to print whatever it found. As far as he was concerned, there was no need for press censorship or media gagging. This led to publications of government scandals by both privately and state-owned newspapers (Harsch, 2014) and media outfits. In response to his opposition to what he saw as the regime's anti-labour drift, declaring "Misfortune to those who gag the people!" (*Malheur à ceux qui bâillonnent le peuple!*), He resigned on 12 April 1982 (Harsch, 2014). This was a clear signal that Sankara would not be swayed from his policies and ideology by perks of political office, position, popularity or privilege.

When on the 7th of November 1982, another military coup brought Major-Doctor Jean-Baptiste Ouédraogo to power, Thomas Sankara emerged as the Prime Minister in January 1983 but was for obvious reasons bothering on ideological and irreconcilable differences, unfortunately, suddenly dismissed on May 17, 1983. Paradoxically, in within those four months as Prime Minister, Sankara pushed Ouédraogo's regime so hard for more progressive reforms (Skinner, 1988). Sankara was then arrested after the French President's African affairs adviser, Guy Penne, met with Col. Yorian Somé (Martin, 1987). Henri Zongo and Jean-Baptiste Boukary Lingani were also placed under arrest. The decision to arrest Sankara proved to be very unpopular with the younger officers in the military regime and his imprisonment created enough momentum for his friend Blaise Compaoré to lead another coup. (Martin, 1987)

The counter coup d'état planned and executed by Blaire Compaore installed Thomas Sankara as President on August 4, 1983 at the age of 33. The coup d'état was supported by Libya which was at the time on the verge of war with France in Chad. Sankara saw himself as a revolutionary and was inspired by mentors like Fidel Castro of Cuba, Che Guevara and Jerry John Rawlings of Ghana (*africa.sis.gov.eg. 2021*). He drew inspiration, policy, ideological direction from these men.

On assumption of office as President, Thomas Sankara promoted the "Democratic and Popular Revolution" (*Révolution démocratique et populaire*, or RDP). The ideology of the Revolution was defined by Sankara as anti-imperialist in a speech on October 2, 1983, the *Discours d'orientation politique* (DOP) written by his close associate Valere Some. His policy was oriented toward fighting corruption, promoting reforestation, averting famine and making education and health real priorities (Jaffré, 2015). Indeed, it was a phenomenal upstaging of a visionary, selfless, determined, dogged African leader who was going to be radically different from a typical African leader.

No doubt, there is an urgent need for Africa to upstage political leaders of repute that will not only keep growth and development of their various states and indeed the African continent as focus, but also see the need to invest in capacity building and expansion of skill sets so that programme participants are strong, result-oriented leaders. Statistics show that nearly 33% of Africans are between age 10 and 24 and approximately 60% of Africa's total population is below age 35. This army of young Africans need to be properly led and guided.

Thomas Sankara's Domestic Reforms

As soon as Thomas Sankara assumed office as President at the age of 33, he sent out a very clear message that he intended to banish a lot of the chronic problems in Upper Volta administrative and political leadership. He took over a government plagued by nepotism, ineptitude, and systemic corruption. It was characterised by ghost workers on the payroll, underperformance and laxity in public service, civil service absenteeism, and extravagant spending.

At the initial state, he showed a lot of promise in his early days. The first critical economic step taken by him was to block all leakages in the economy, check wastages and enforce budget discipline. Thomas Sankara suspended tax-free earnings for the Ministers and high ranking officials of his government, expanded the tax net thus accruing so much revenue to finance fundamental infrastructural developments and in five years had practically moved Burkina Faso to a medium economy. As soon as Sankara became the President of the Republic of Upper Volta, he immediately launched programmes for social, ecological and economic change and renamed the country from the French Colonial name, Upper Volta to Burkina Faso meaning literally the "Land of Incorruptible People", with its people being called Burkinabé "upright people" (Sankara, 2007). This step in itself is a gradual but persistent emotional decolonization process which interrogates the patriotic sense of the citizens.

Thomas Sankara's foreign policies were centred on anti-imperialism, while he rejected aid from organizations such as the International Monetary Fund. Sankara welcomed foreign aid from other sources but tried to reduce reliance on aid by boosting domestic revenues and diversifying the sources of assistance. (Zeilig, 2018).

His domestic policies were focused on preventing famine with agrarian self-sufficiency and land reforms. Total cereal production rose by 75% between 1983 and 1986. He prioritised education with a nationwide literacy campaign, building of several schools while also promoting public health by building several health centres. He commissioned that over 2 million children be vaccinated against meningitis, yellow fever and measles (Murrey, 2020). He went further to construct water reservoirs and nearly 100 km of rail lines. He accomplished all these within a very short time with little or no external assistance (Keita, 2020).

Other components of his national agenda included planting over 10 million trees to combat the growing desertification of the Sahel, redistributing land from private landowners, suspending rural poll taxes and domestic rents and establishing a road and railway construction programme (Smith, 2015). On the local level, Sankara called on every village to build a medical dispensary and had

pharmacies built in 5,384 out of 7,500 villages (Zeilig, 2018). From 1982-1984 the infant mortality rate dropped from 208 per 1,000 births to 145. School attendance under Sankara increased from 6% to 22% (Smith, 2015).

Moreover, he outlawed female genital mutilation, forced marriages and polygamy. He appointed women to high governmental positions and encouraged them to work outside the home and stay in school, even if pregnant (Smith, 2015). Sankara encouraged the prosecution of officials accused of corruption, counter revolutionaries and those he labelled as “Lazy Workers” in Popular Revolutionary Tribunals (PRTs) As an admirer of the Cubane Cuban Revolution, Sankara set up Cuban-style Committees for the Defence of the Revolution. Such programs led to criticism by The Amnesty International and other non-governmental organization for violations of human rights, including extrajudicial execution and arbitrary detentions of political opponents (Amnesty International, 1988).

His revolutionary programmes for African self-reliance made him an icon to many of Africa's poor. (Harsch, 2014). Sankara remained popular with most of his country's citizens. However, his policies alienated and antagonised several groups, which included the small but powerful Burkinabé middle class, the tribal leaders who were stripped of their long-held traditional privileges of forced labour and tribute payments and the governments of France and its ally the Ivory Coast (BBC News, 2007). Opposition parties and unions were banned and media freedoms curtailed. Striking teachers were fired and replaced by young people with no experience. On October 15, 1987 Thomas Sankara was assassinated by troops led by Blaire Compaore who assumed leadership of the state shortly after having Sankara killed.

Internal Contradictions and External Conspiracies

In practically every nation-state in Africa including Ethiopia and Liberia that were not directly colonized by the colonial adventuring nations, there is the dearth of leadership that is visionary, selfless, determined, courageous and sagacious. Therefore, wherever and whenever, any African state upstages a seemingly capacious leader, attention is logically, naturally and understandably focussed on such a state. That accounts for the expectations from the global community as Upper Volta got one. Unfortunately, internal contradictions and external conspiracies truncated the dream and drive for purposeful leadership in the country.

In a dramatic way, on October 15, 1987, a man in a white T-shirt and red track pants walked into a meeting with six of his cabinet ministers. Dressed for his weekly soccer match, the president of Burkina Faso, Thomas Sankara, was thirty-seven years old, with a flashing smile and a magnetic personality. That day, he arrived at his cabinet meeting in his unimposing black Peugeot 205. He lived on a salary he capped at the equivalent of about \$462 per month. His few assets were public knowledge: a car, a refrigerator, a few bicycles and several guitars. While many members of Burkina Faso's ruling class were busy enriching themselves with public funds, Sankara scrupulously modelled his convictions that servants of the state were stewards of the people's money and privileged custodians of the people's mandate.

When he assumed office, Thomas Sankara began a regeneration of Upper Volta region through land and agrarian reforms and advocating for a more gender inclusive economy. His much leaning to socialist and communist thought meant that he shunned Foreign Aid, Breton Woods institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank and further moved against the feudal system which was the order of the day in the then Upper Volta. These policies were not only resisted by the opposing forces within his country, there were external forces resisting the reforms and radical economic policies which was changing the narratives hitherto favourable to the neo colonial tendencies, establishment and agents.

The implication of these reforms meant that he severed all ties with France, the erstwhile colonial masters and angered most chiefs and Upper Volta's middle class which was also a centre of power. Blaise Compaoré saw this as a great opportunity to rally local and external forces against Sankara. A convergence of internal contradictions and external conspiracies in a clandestine move to nullify Africa's rising leadership star. He did that successfully. He wanted the French influence to be sustained in Burkina Faso as much as he desired that the old system be retained, sustained while vehemently opposing any reforms advanced by Sankara. It would later surface in a Truth and Reconciliation hearing in Liberia that former rebel leader and dictator, Charles Taylor assisted Compaoré in getting rid of Sankara (Wilkins, 1989).

In Burkina Faso, the trial for the 1987 murder of Thomas Sankara had 14 suspects, one of whom was former president Blaise Compaoré, his very close ally. During Compaoré's long reign, the subject of Sankara's murder was taboo, the media leaving many unhappy that the killers were never punished. Interesting details later emerged about France's involvement against the "African Che Guevara", the man who gave Africa hope of liberation from French colonialism and the oppression of the IMF and the World Bank and who was a very uncomfortable figure for the French government. The hope of upstaging genuine African leader as a model was truncated.

At the root of most African states' instability are the external conspiracies and influences from erstwhile colonial masters.

Thomas Sankara and the Development of Burkina Faso: A Critique

Despite the dramatic emergence, internal reforms and phenomenal leadership provided by Thomas Sankara, there are some criticisms levelled against his policies and programmes. To start with, the British development organisation, Oxfam recorded and reported the arrest of trade union leaders in 1987 (Michael, 1989). The attention of the international community was drawn to the excesses of his government with some sections of the international press coming down heavily on his government especially from France, the erstwhile colonial masters. Furthermore, in 1984, seven individuals associated with the previous regime were accused of treason and executed after a summary trial. This action was roundly condemned by the international community.

A teachers' strike the same year resulted in the dismissal of over 2,500 teachers; thereafter, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and unions were harassed or placed under the authority of the Committees for the Defence of the Revolution, (CDR) branches of which were established in each

workplace and which functioned as "organs of political and social control" (Otayek, 1986). Sankara indeed believed, certain drastic steps and policies were needed to straighten, strengthen and reposition procedures in government for effectiveness, efficiency and optimal performance.

Popular Revolutionary Tribunals set up by the government throughout the country, placed defendants on trial for corruption, tax evasion or "counter-revolutionary" activities. Procedures in these trials, especially legal protections for the accused, did not conform to international standards, thus attracted global condemnation. According to Christian Morrisson and Jean-Paul Azam of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) the "climate of urgency and drastic action in which many punishments were carried out immediately against those who had the misfortune to be found guilty of un-revolutionary behaviour, bore some resemblance to what occurred in the worst days of the French Revolution during the Reign of Terror. Although few people were killed, violence was widespread" (Morrisson & Azam, 1999).

Conclusion

This study has examined the internal contradictions, external conspiracies and the search for an African leader using the case of Thomas Sanakara. The findings of the study reveal that the coming on stage of Thomas Sanakara albeit undemocratic, unpopular and unacceptable to the international community, provided Burkina Faso an opportunity to show Africa and the world the possibility of upstaging a dynamic, visionary, courageous, disciplined, focused and incorruptible African leader, though short lived by the combined forces of neo-colonialism. The findings of the study also reveal that the search for African leader is a laudable project, however, there will be a very germane need for the African states to address the internal contradictions, structural defects, social dislocations. These influences strengthen the unfortunate perpetual economic ties of the African states to the exploitative, oppressive aprons of the western powers.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

- i. The search for African leader in the class of Thomas Sankara should be a continuous, deliberate process with clearly spelt out policies, strategies and programmes sustainable until Africa and African states can upstage visionary, courageous, committed, selfless leaders across the component states in Africa.
- ii. Africa should deliberately make concerted efforts to extricate the states from the clogs of colonial and neo-colonial cleavages and concentrate on the stability of her component socio-political environment and sustainable economic growth and development massively independent of external borrowings, leanings and reliance on foreign aids.
- iii. Africa should build very strong, progressive, dynamic institutions in such a way and to such extent that the impact of any single emerging leader will not be too phenomenal in

the process of nation building, economic advancement and industrial growth and development.

- iv. The African Union should see Sankara like Lumumba, as another martyr in Africa's long struggle for decolonization, strategically set up policies, programmes and institutions that will democratically upstage such leaders all over Africa.
- v. Henceforth Africa should stop being "The obedient client of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) development programs." Sankara and John Magufuli have clearly shown the dispensability of those institutions with neo-colonial agendas especially for the component states of Africa. It is time for Africa to go in pursuit of self-reliance.
- vi. Africa will also need to corporately address the phenomenon of external influences. This will curb their controls, tendencies and influences on the African political landscape. It does not matter if they are former colonial masters or donor nations or interested capitalist enclaves, any such external forces that take pride in the disorganization of the African states to enhance the perpetual exploitation of the African natural resources and perpetuate neo-colonial tendencies should be checked.

References

africa.sis.gov.eg. 2021 accessed on July 1, 2022

Amnesty International (1988). *Burkina Faso: Political imprisonment and the use of torture from 1983 to 1988* London: Amnesty International.

"BBC NEWS – Africa – Burkina commemorates slain leader". news.bbc.co.uk. 15 October 2007. Retrieved 15 October 2014.

Harsch, E. (2014). *Thomas Sankara: An African Revolutionary*. Ohio University Press

Jaffré, B. (2015; April 23). "The Political Orientation Speech of Thomas Sankara". *My Blog*. Retrieved on 7 May 2021

Kasuka, B. (2012). *Prominent African Leaders Since Independence*. Bankole Kamara; Taylor

Keita, M. (2020). "Why Burkina Faso's late revolutionary leader Thomas Sankara still inspires young Africans". *Quartz Africa*. Retrieved on 31 December 2020

Martin, G. (1987). Ideology and Praxis in Thomas Sankara's Populist Revolution of 4 August 1983 in Burkina Faso. *Journal of Opinion*. 15, 77–90.

Morrisson, C. & Azam, J.P. (1999). *Conflict and Growth in Africa: The Sahel*. Paris: OECD.

Murrey, A (2020). "Thomas Sankara and a Political Economy of Happiness" in O.S Oloruntoba & T. Falola (eds.) *The Palgrave Handbook of African Political Economy* (pp. 193–208), Cham: Springer International Publishing,

Otayek, R. (1986). 'The Revolutionary Process in Burkina Faso: Breaks and Continuities,' in J Markakis & M. Waller (eds) *Military Marxist Régimes in Africa*. London: Frank Cass,

Smith, D. (2015; March 6). "Burkina Faso's revolutionary hero Thomas Sankara to be exhumed". *The Guardian*. Retrieved 31 December 2020.

Skinner, Elliott P. (1988). "Sankara and the Burkinabe Revolution: Charisma and Power, Local and External Dimensions". *The Journal of Modern African Studies*. 26 (3): 442–443.

Thomas Sankara Speaks. (2007). *The Burkina Faso Revolution 1983–87, by Thomas Sankara*, Pathfinder, pp. 20–21.

Wilkins, M. (1989). "The Death of Thomas Sankara and the Rectification of the People's Revolution in Burkina Faso". *African Affairs*. 88 (352), 384.

Zeilig, L. (2018). *A Certain Amount of Madness: The Life, Politics and Legacies of Thomas Sankara*. Pluto Press